

POLICY BRIEF

Japan's normative policy: coalition-building and pragmatism

Since the start of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine in February 2022, awareness has grown in the West that the so-called rules-based order and 'universal values' are not shared globally. Many countries in the global South have refused to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine, let alone comply with Western sanctions against Moscow, while rejecting the predominantly American logic of dividing the world into "democracies versus autocracies," as proposed by US President Joe Biden. Others such as China and Russia aim to propose entirely different sets of values. In short, the war in Ukraine has reignited the debate on universal values, and ideational power plays a central role in the ongoing great-power competition. On the positive side, the Ukraine war united the European Union in taking a strong and common stance on condemning the breach of sovereignty and stressing the necessity for international law to prevail. However, the conflict in the Middle East between Israel and Hamas has further exacerbated the values debate. Countries in the Global South are accusing the EU of maintaining double standards, failing to speak out against Israel's infringement of international law and forsaking the emphasis on strongly held European values such as human dignity and human rights. The Middle East conflict has furthermore laid bare divisions within the EU, between the Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS), and between individual Member States.



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Author

Bart Gaens, Finnish Institute of International Affairs;

Japan, the US's closest ally in the Indo-Pacific and often regarded as firmly in the Western camp, has also been accused of double standards. Tokyo took a firm stance against Russia and its invasion of Ukraine, supporting the Western position rooted in support for international norms. This was driven primarily by the alleged possibility of a Ukraine scenario playing out over Taiwan, and Japan becoming embroiled in a potential future conflict. However, in reacting to the Middle East conflict, Japan treaded much more cautiously and diplomatically. It took a more neutral position, not least in view of its reliance on crude oil from Arab countries. An additional driver of restraint was Japan's aim to pay more attention to the interests and views of emerging powers and developing countries in an increasingly post-western world. It has done so in order to offer an alternative to China and to promote trade and connectivity partnerships in the region, while recognising the more prominent collective role of countries in the Global South in the rules-based order and their increasingly strong voice in it.

Japan has been emphasising a value-oriented diplomacy at least since the early 2000s, starting with Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō, as a result of economic stagnation and a rising and increasingly antagonistic China. Initially, it was seen as a tool to strengthen the alliance with the US and cement stronger relations with ASEAN, India, Australia and Europe. Since then Japan has been referred to as a norms entrepreneur, which is all about attracting followers for a certain idea or policy. Certainly, in the cases of human security and quality infrastructure Japan has achieved success in international standard-setting. In the early 2000s Japan successfully promoted shared understandings of the concept of human security in ODA policies, and in 2019 the G20 summit adopted Japan's concept of quality infrastructure as a set of new principles for infrastructure projects. Some scholars have even proposed the idea of Japan as a normative power in view of Tokyo's active engagement in the construction of a stable world order through diplomacy, international institutions and official development aid.

One policy idea related to order-building and entrenched in values has been Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), which was launched in 2016 during the second administration of Prime Minis-

ter Abe Shinzō. FOIP is a good example of a successful narrative project that has been adopted by other actors. For Japan, FOIP essentially seeks to promote principles (themselves rooted in values) such as the rule of law, freedom of navigation, free trade, economic prosperity and peace and stability through maritime security.

Less overtly, FOIP pertains to three policy goals. First, it is about Japan's defence policy including the alliance with the US. Under the FOIP construct, Japan aims to strengthen the alliance while simultaneously beefing up its own defence and deterrence, a process that has been continuing under the current administration of Prime Minister Kishida Fumio. For Abe, a strong Japan also meant more autonomy and one additional step away from what he referred to as the postwar regime. This stands in marked contrast to other normative projects such as Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio's proposal for an East Asian Community. Hatoyama, in office in 2009-2010, sought to break free from "the chronic illness called subservience to the US" (*taibei jūzoku to iu shukua*) and considered East Asia to be Japan's "basic sphere of being". He therefore promoted EU-style integration in order to create an East Asian community based on rapprochement between Japan and China.

Second, FOIP is about bringing India more into the regional equation in order to balance China. In so doing it aims to foster a new strategic definition of an enlarged maritime region rooted in its own rules, norms and expectations, and with a key strategic role for India as a regional power. As Abe noted in his memoirs, precursors of this idea can be traced back all the way to 1957, when Abe's maternal grandfather and then-prime minister Kishi Nobusuke sought and found rapprochement with Indian Prime Minister Nehru. Following Abe's "Confluence of Two Seas" speech in the Indian parliament in 2007, the idea of a wider maritime region was also translated into Abe's "Democratic Security Diamond" (2012) policy idea, which later materialised through the revived Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) between the US, Japan, Australia and India in 2017.

Third, FOIP is about fostering Japan's bilateral partnerships with third countries and regions. Since the early 2000s, Japan has put strong emphasis

on strengthening bilateral ties with other countries, in particular through ‘strategic partnership’ agreements, often said to be based on shared common values and norms. In a region that still attaches prime importance to the idea of non-interference, strategic partnerships have enjoyed particular popularity in the Indo-Pacific as highly flexible foreign policy instruments to promote cooperation on security, trade, economics and investment. In general, in strategic partnerships most often shared interests take precedence over shared values. Disagreements over internal politics and human rights, for example, are often muted in the interest of cooperation on matters of shared concern.

Assessing a country’s normative policy is not an easy task. After all, a values-informed foreign policy is not necessarily a benign or soft one. For example, it is certainly possible to argue that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is based on strong values and deeply held images and principles. Furthermore, as was clear in the Asian values debate of the 1980s-1990s, elite discourses on so-called Asian values such as hierarchy and community often served as tools to resist calls for human rights and democracy. In addition, a direct link between policy and values is often missing, and it is easy to find examples of countries focusing much more on narrowly-defined geopolitical or geoeconomic interests rather than on a genuine pursuit of shared universal values. Last, applying the notion of ‘enlightened self-interest’ (in Japanese called ‘open national interest’ *hirakareta kokueki*), countries often admit to a selfishness that, at the very least, does not violate the interests of other countries or, at best, aims to be to their benefit as well.

A cursory look at Japan’s values-based diplomacy yields three key observations. First, Tokyo’s alignment policy, including FOIP, is explicitly rooted in an emphasis on common values, rules, norms and principles, in view of the idea that a shared normative basis and common values are important facilitators of cooperation. Appealing to shared norms and principles contributes to coalition-building, promotes collaboration and can even explain it. Shared values and principles are still seen as the basis for what FOIP policy papers refer to as ‘tailored networking’ with partners in the Indo-Pacific. After all, Japan has vested interests in maintaining

the status quo, in keeping the US robustly engaged in the region and in thwarting any Chinese attempts to revise territorial or maritime borders in the East and South China Seas, for example. Values and principles play a significant role in building support in order to prevent any challenges to the current regional order.

Second, values-based narratives have an important legitimising role. For domestic audiences they seek to justify ideas, values, policies and visions, such as the Japanese government’s views on regional stability through the FOIP construct. For external audiences, they promote ideas such as Broader Asia, as proposed by the Indo-Pacific construct, as a maritime region that brings India closer in the regional fold and ties together the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Third and last, appealing to values comes at a cost. Any country proclaiming it conducts a normative policy can easily be accused of double standards or even hypocrisy, and Japan is no exception. However, partly due to its own history, Japan has been relatively reluctant to interfere in the internal affairs of recipient countries in the post-war period, and has de facto adhered to a non-conditionality policy. Instead, Japan’s economic cooperation has been firmly focused on promotion of its own national interests, both commercial and strategic. Currently Japan implicitly admits that it takes a pragmatic stance, and does not seek to preach or impose values. Japan is keenly aware that an all too strong emphasis on certain values can have an adverse effect, as counterpart countries may seek to engage with more pragmatically inclined countries. It is therefore no coincidence that Prime Minister Kishida has proclaimed a “realism diplomacy for a new era” that seeks to avoid excluding anyone, creating camps and imposing values. A pragmatic respect for diversity and different ways of thinking but rooted in a shared adherence to the rule of law is therefore a core element of the revised FOIP plan revealed in March 2023, significantly in New Delhi. Engaging with partners in the Global South, including India and ASEAN countries, is a prime and explicit aim of Japan’s new Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept.

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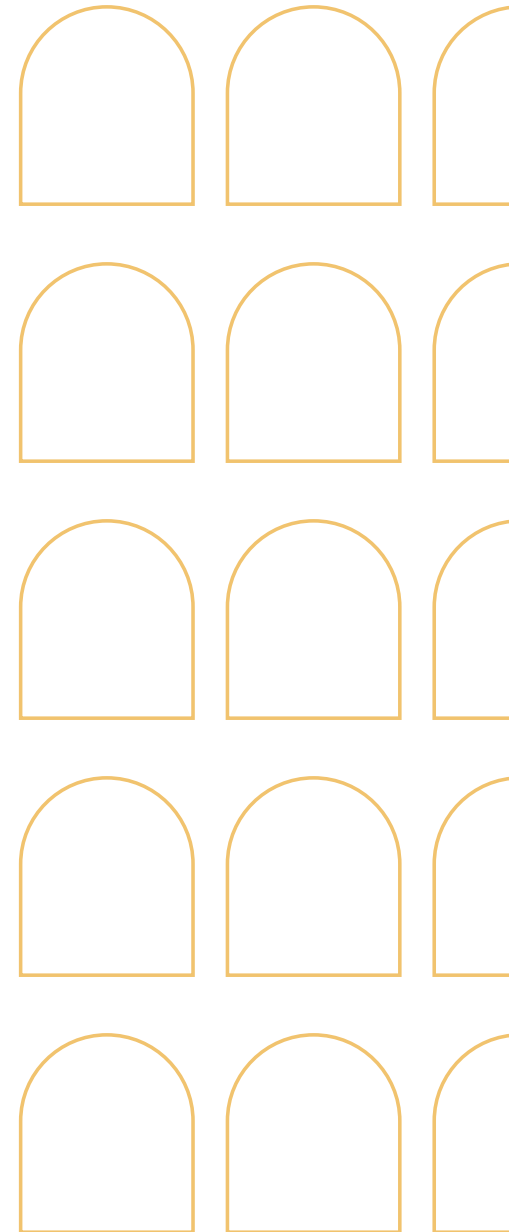
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